THE ART EXHIBITION CATALOGUES OF THE VICTORIA AND ALBERT MUSEUM

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(LONDON: Victoria & Albert Museum)

THE PICTURE POSTCARD 1870-1920

travelling exhibition arranged by
the Circulation Department
the Victoria and Albert Museum

THE PICTURE POSTCARD
1870–1920

This exhibition, organized to celebrate th official centenary of the picture postcard wa first shown, in a slightly larger version, at th Victoria & Albert Museum in December 197 The exhibition owes a great deal to Mr Peter Lawrence, who first suggested it an made available his extensive private collec tion of early postcards, which form th nucleus of the exhibition. Mr Lawrence wa continually at hand with help and advic during the preparation of the exhibition an has written the introduction printed belo

Barbara Morris
Assistant Keeper of Circulation Departme

Postcards were described by an early writer as being 'A Mirror on Life'—certainly they reflect aspects of sociology and tastes of the times more poignantly than many other media. Visitors to the exhibition with refined tastes may find some of the cards maudlin or vulgar, incomprehensible or fantastic. If they are so, then it may be that so were our recent ancestors. The cards have been selected by the Circulation Department and Library staff of the Victoria & Albert Museum with no pretence that they all represent the acme of perfection in artistic creation. On the contrary the cards were not designed for (and often not by) the cultured. Many are in fact pure examples of popular or folk art of their period. In view of the vast quantity of available material, the choice of exhibits has been extremely difficult. The temptation to restrict the exhibition to rarities has been resisted and there are but few cards of philatelic importance or with significant autographic messages. Those examples included are a cross-section of types which have survived being torn up by stamp-collectors or burnt, which has been the fate of many similar cards. The exhibition illustrates the range of forms and materials available, some of the artists who have contributed to them, the subjects illustrated and a few of the purposes for which they were used.

In October 1870 Queen Victoria was 51 when her portrait, in the form of a stamp, was printed on the first British postcards. These cards carried no picture apart from the Royal Arms, although examples with advertising matter on the reverse were sometimes illustrated. Private postcards with an adhesive stamp were allowed before 1894 providing that they bore no more than 5 words of greeting; it was not until this date that the production of unofficial picture postcards began in earnest.

Most 19th century postcards, designed for a separate stamp on the address side, carried a small picture on the same side as the message. Up to 1904 these pictures grew in size until only a fraction of the side was available for writing. At this date, the divided back came into use with the message

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sharing about half of the address side, a format which continues to the present day, leaving a whole side for the picture.

Early cards were often smaller than the regulation $3\frac{1}{2} \times 5\frac{1}{2}$ inch size which is standard throughout the 20th century part of the exhibition. There were many departures from this standard, as shown by the Giant Queen Victoria, the book-marking actresses and the box of pills not needed at Ilfracombe.

The frame of postcards about postcards themselves gives an indication of the popularity of the postcard collecting hobby, at its height in the Edwardian era. Cards were often simply 'sent with affection to swell your collection' and thus follow in the tradition of devotional pictures and valentines. The art of pictorial advertising, trading on popular psychology, developed almost simultaneously with postcards and the close link with posters is apparent when the same design appears in both media as with the Tucks' Celebrated Poster series. Using royalty to promote products is a relic of the Victorian technique, which is here applied to the coronation of Edward VII 'Crowned with Birds Custard'. A step further was taken in France where sales of chocolate were promoted by the dubious taste of using a fine piece of religious painting with the name of the product firmly printed on the robe of Jesus Christ.

Many postcards are, however, creative works in their own right, being little masterpieces of lithographic printing designed by such artists as Alphonse Mucha (1860–1939) with his subtle, pastel swirls of flourishing floral feminity or by Raphael Kirchner (1876–1917), whose piquant pin-ups brought joy into the trenches of the 1914–18 War. These and other exponents of the Art Nouveau style are richly represented in the Victoria & Albert Museum collections.

During the first 50 years of postcards there have been tremendous technological advances in transport, recorded on the cards. The faster ships, planes, airships and trains are not only faithfully recorded but also appear on comic cards which give an indication of the public reaction to these innovations.

Patriotism is powerfully portrayed on postcards, when this sentiment was neither funny nor synonymous with racialism. Jellicoe and Kitchener are depicted under the caption 'Take my hand friend and grip it well. Coming ages will tell how we fought hard and vanquished the foul dogs of hell.' Meanwhile on another card, two Tommies under heavy fire in a trench are immortalized on Bruce Bairnsfather's classic 'Old Bill' card, 'If you knows of a better 'ole—go to it.' This War evoked some biting satirical cards from the French caricaturing their enemy leaders as gargoyles on Notre Dame. Examples are shown with cards of the actual sculptures on which they are based.

Symbolism and tenderness are evident throughout the exhibition, with delicacy of touch, subtlety of colour and the cunning composition of floral, infant or feminine motifs. These convey romance blooming into love and seeding into babies. Great and glorious is motherhood, the Mother Country and the Empire. The cards record views no longer seen or shared and photo-montage transforms the scenes into surrealist realms of fantasy. The flights of fancy and use of symbols, consciously or not, enters a dream world which is artistically inspiring and psychologically intriguing. How does one interpret babies emerging from cabbages, jostling for potties and forming a symphony orchestra? The *trompe l'oeil* undertones hide nightmarish fears, romance and lechery, while Pierrot's nightlife of wine and women builds up to form the face of death.

Portraits of personalities of the period, particularly stars of the theatrical and political stages, appear frequently on postcards. Mounting their favourites in an album was a pastime of the fans and a logical progression from collecting Victorian *carte de visite* type photographs. Among the artistic and literary figures carefully and professionally posed one finds prime ministers, royalty, Sister Emily as Britannia and a little girl dressed entirely in 'Tit Bits'. It was an age of individual creativity, fancy dress parties and musical evenings. Poetry was sold from a perambulator and a man in an iron mask, also photographed complete with pram, set out

round the world and reached Woking Station. All these characters reached their public by picture postcards displayed in this exhibition.

One cannot fail to be impressed by the tranquillity and utter feminity of the lovely ladies portrayed. In 50 years women have changed almost as much as motor cars; their figures were a trifle more generous than the 36-24-36 ratio demanded by today's beauty jungle. The subjects in the exhibition are treated with dignity, modesty and natural grace. Judges of beauty in the Edwardian era went along the line of contestants with a black velvet glove, touching their faces to ensure that there was not a trace of powder or rouge. The art, or rather the artifice, of cosmetics was more or less confined to painted hussies. There was no widespread attempt to attract males by the primitive method of applying artificial colouring to the skin, nor was there any generally accepted attempt to ape men. The art of being lovely was due to natural charm, clean living and a good soap.

The men of the period appeared less commonly on postcards perhaps because their mode of dress was less decorative. However, among those heroes to be so depicted are two great aviation pioneers, similarly treated by their publishers but strongly contrasting in character. Count Zeppelin of Germany is shown framed within an intertwined wreath, looking as proud and splendid as the airship to which he gave his name. For Britain Dr Barton of Bromley is reduced to a small circular inset with his airship, which crashed into a potato field shown inside and outside its hangar. Dr Barton made history by being Britain's first air male when he dropped postcards from a balloon to commemorate Edward VII's Coronation. Dr Barton made his own hydrogen by tipping 50 tons of iron filings into 600 carboys of sulphuric acid—bucket by bucket. He survived an explosion in the process to make non-alcoholic champagne, run a casino, invent a humane rabbit trap, roller blind and motor car engine which converted into a fire pump. Today this modestly-portrayed genius is remembered largely for his postcard activities.

A more extreme example of inset photographs on a postcard used for dramatic effect is shown in the ship frame. Here a memorial card records the disastrous wreck of *H.M.S. Gladiator*, which was involved in a collision with an American liner. The drowned captain and crew grimly decorate an artistic interpretation of the tragedy. This card and that showing the sinking of the *Titanic* are examples of postcards being used to spread news, as also are the pictures of social gatherings photographed in the 'Dressing Up' frame.

The photographic artists of the postcard era, who hid under black cloths and peered at life upside down on ground-glass focusing screens, are largely anonymous. It is a tragedy that no original examples of their photomontage work appear to exist today, although great hoards may lie unrecorded and scheduled for destruction.

It is in the field of drawing rather than that of photography that postcard artists are better appreciated. They are most prominent on cards intended to be comic and a study of the subjects selected as provoking amusement gives a keen insight into contemporary life and moral standards. Donald McGill whose humour evolved with public taste from the gentle to the crude is perhaps the best known of the almost exclusively postcard artists. Tom Browne, Dudley Hardy, Phil May and Lawson Wood were already established artists in other fields. Each supplied his own particular brand of whimsicality to portray aspects of the period and the sociology of the seaside holiday. Francis Sager contributes French-flavoured naughty postcards of lascivious doctors, peeping Toms and women as temptresses. Charles Dana Gibson uses a lighter romantic touch and shows women as goddesses. The most versatile British postcard artist is undoubtedly James Bamforth, a lantern slide maker from Holmfirth, Yorkshire. He not only painted the backdrops but actually dressed and directed villagers to pose as angels or soldiers, besides doing the photographic and printing work. A selection of his sentimental and religious song-card sets is shown but he also produced comic cards which are stills from some of the earliest of all slapstick films.

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Postcards were decorated with gramoph
records which actually play, with tinsel,
cock tails, metal airships or lumps of c
Hats lifted up to expose attractions in
form of a concertina of views, while o
cards combine to form Napoleon or
Father Christmas. They were as diverse
life itself.

William Ewart Gladstone, four times Pr
Minister of England continued to write p
cards at the age of 88. The 'Grand Old M
contributed much to the respectability
postcards and actually attributed his l
life to them. The Right Hon. H. Cecil Rai
Postmaster-General in 1890 speaking,
part, of the postcard described it as
'Institution which has done more for
cause of universal civilisation than alm
any other political or social discovery.'

Today the inventiveness and variety of
picture postcard has largely gone, repla
almost universally by the ubiquitous un
the glossy colour photograph.

The place of the postcard album has
taken by the television set. People who
delighted in their individual and un
collections, now prefer to watch the
pictures as millions of others. Recent
creased postal charges, making cards as
to dispatch as letters, have also contrib
to the decline of picture postcards.

Let us preserve and enjoy these fragmen
our heritage from an age of individu
away from mass media. The picture post
provides a poignant record of our past.
art forms can be understood by the uni
ated and may offer instruction toward
appreciation of artistic and moral issue
a loftier plane.

P. N. Lawrence